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Task Force Liberty Engineers Keep Roads Safe

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE SUMMERALL, IRAQ – In a conflict where highways are the frontlines, U.S. Army engineers are on point daily, finding and surviving improvised explosive devices or IEDs.

Using their eyes, intuition, training and experience, Soldiers of Company C, 103rd Engineer Battalion, comb area roads looking for IEDs before they can be detonated in attacks against Coalition Forces, contractors, Iraqi citizens or Iraqi security forces. It's called a route-clearing operation, and the Soldiers have found 25 IEDs and survived six IED attacks since they took over the mission, in support of Task Force Liberty last January.

"We go out and look for IEDs and check anything that looks suspicious, to keep the routes open," said unit member Sgt. Peter Moore, who is from Los Angeles. "Our goal is to keep the routes open so the convoys can get through safely."

For the Soldiers, that means driving the baking-hot roads of the Iraqi countryside in the cramped quarters of Humvees.

Looking for any sign that might indicate the presence of an IED and clearing the roads of debris that could be used to hide IEDs. A job, unit member Staff Sgt. Christopher Blomquist, of Twin Peaks, Calif., describes as "attention to detail."

"We have three or four sets of eyes in each vehicle scanning the sides of the road looking for anything that's unusual...anything big enough to hide something," he said. "We stop, we look at it and try to clear it off the road."

Anything as innocuous as a tire, a dead animal, a can, or an MRE box can be used to hide an IED, said Blomquist.

"We're just very observant," said Blomquist. "Where most people are traveling down the road going 50, 60 miles per hour, we travel 20 to 25. We go slow, we take our time."

When the Soldiers find an IED, they alert explosive-ordnance personnel to dispose of it safely.

Blomquist and unit member Spc. Wayne Mullings, of Philadelphia, are

two of the unit's IED survivors. They were dismounted, checking a bridge when Blomquist saw an IED, which he described as "a 122 round with wires coming out of it that was stuck in a washout."

"I walked up to and saw it. It was partially obscured by tumbleweed," he said.

Blomquist shouted to Mullings to run, and then turned away himself, just as the IED exploded, barely ten feet from them. Blomquist suffered only minor injuries, and he said the attack, while frightening, doesn't stop him from going out on route-clearing operations, Blomquist said.

"It's my job, it's what I do," he said.

Other unit IED survivors include Sgt. 1st Class David Broderick, Pvt. 1st Class Giovanni Andres Cubano, Spc. Waldo Rodriguez, and 1st Lt. Daniel Abraminko. They were returning from a route-clearing operation recently when an IED exploded right next to their Humvee. Broderick, who is from Pittsburgh, said they were almost back to their base when there was a "huge boom and dust everywhere."

The explosion knocked out the vehicle's steering and brakes. Some pieces of shrapnel penetrated the crew compartment and the fire extinguisher, causing its contents to spray out all over the interior of the vehicle.

As the vehicle coasted to a stop off the road, their training kicked in, said Broderick, and they began to check each other for injuries, radio their status to the rest of the platoon, and scan for what are known as 'secondaries'. Follow-up IED attacks designed to kill Soldiers aiding those wounded in the initial attack.

The rest of the platoon meanwhile began their battle drills. Setting up traffic control points and scanning for the terrorists who set off the IED, said Abraminko, who is from Philadelphia.

"The other guys in the platoon did the right thing," Abraminko said. "They looked for secondary IEDs and then came to help us." Their M1114 up-armored Humvee saved their lives, said Abraminko, along with their body armor, ballistic glasses and earplugs.

"I want to write the company who made our Humvee a thank-you note,"

he said.

"I suspected something like this would happen," he said. "I knew the risks going out. It was just a matter of time. I'll still get back in that gunner's hatch. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

The Soldiers know the roads, said Broderick, and are alert for changes, or, as he put it, "something is not right," like coming home and seeing furniture out of place. While seeing the same roads everyday helps in the hunt for IEDs, he said.

"We consider this our sector and our roads," he said. "If something bad happens, we feel we've let someone down."

Staying on edge, motivation, and not being complacent are central to safety and the success of the missions, said Moore.

The ultimate success of Operation Iraqi Freedom is what Broderick is focused on, and he considers interaction with the Iraqi people the greatest challenge of the job.

"That's what I came here for," Broderick said, "to help these people, and give them their country back."



Engineers of Company C, 103rd Engineer Battalion use smoke to warn Iraqi civilians to keep a safe distance away while they search for IEDs along Iraqi roads

Task Force Liberty 'Glory Guns' light up the night



An illumination round fired from the Paladin track vehicle descends toward the ground in the distance near Samarra, Iraq.

Spc. Jimmy D. Lane Jr.
1st BCT Public Affairs

SAMARRA, IRAQ - In the middle of the night, a loud explosion rips through the darkness. A few seconds later, and a few kilometers away, the ground is lit up by a light in the sky.

Enemies who were depending on the cover of darkness now have no place to hide. This is made possible by Soldiers of B Battery, 1st Battalion, 41st Field Artillery Regiment.

"Tonight we are going to fire two different kinds of rounds," said 1st Lt. John Dorffeld, a B Battery 1/41 FA platoon leader. "We have two guns we are taking with us, and each one will fire in a different direction, giving us a good lateral spread."

"We were given a mission to supply illumination

coverage for the (Iraqi Ministry of Interior) during Operation Forsyth Park," said Sgt. 1st Class Mark Lowry, B battery 1/41 platoon sergeant.

Illumination coverage lights up the area for ground troops so they have more situational awareness, Lowry said. "We were taking back the night from the terrorists."

The illumination round has several different purposes, the most important being the identification of enemy targets, Lowry said.

"We had a good function of all the illumination rounds, with chief coverage of a grid area. We have an observer out there with sight of six or eight kilometers," Lowry said. "When the round bursts he uses it to identify targets. We also use the round as a distraction for the enemy. The enemy will look up and watch the round. It also gives us an idea of who

is doing something wrong. You can't really hear the round until it is right over you, and by then it is too late for them to disguise what they are doing."

The artillery Soldiers got the intelligence for their area of fire from a group of special scouts who observed the area well before the fire mission.

"We were firing on predetermined targets," Lowry said. "Our fire support element got information from the (long range surveillance detachment) that there was high insurgent activity in the area."

After the illumination rounds, 1/41 tested 15 rocket-assisted projectiles. A RAP goes beyond what a regular round could reach due to the rocket propulsion.

"It will go two or three kilometers further, depending on the size of the charge, which increases our range," Lowry said. "Not only does this keep our Soldiers safer, but it saves time on having to move forward to engage targets that under normal circumstances would be out of our range."

The platoon command team considered the mission a success for several different reasons.

"It was a very successful night," Lowry said. "For one, it was a different operation that we don't normally get to do. Our main mission is terrain denial and counter-fire so this was a morale booster for the Soldiers."

Artillery elements are powerful and destructive, so a great deal of preparation goes into a fire mission. Soldiers make every effort to avoid damaging anything not expected in the impact area.

"We have to go out there and observe an area and make sure we don't kill a guy trying to repair an irrigation ditch. We are trying to make allies, not enemies and if we make the whole country suffer we aren't going to be able to accomplish that. Neither can we do that if we are causing damage to Iraqi property."

Reverse osmosis filtration system provides clean water for Task Force Liberty Soldiers

Story and Photos by Sgt. Jeffrey Lucas,
145th Support Battalion

FORWARD OPERATING BASE WARRIOR, IRAQ - Cleaner shower water is now available for 116th Brigade Combat Team Soldiers stationed at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Gains-Mills thanks to a state-of-the-art water purification system recently installed there.

In the last several weeks, the 145th Support Battalion has set up a Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Unit (ROWPU) to bolster the water capability at the FOB. Additionally, the water holding tanks have been thoroughly cleaned.

Before the ROWPU was delivered to FOB Gains-Mills, Soldiers had no water purification system. The Soldiers had bottled water to drink, but showers were a different issue. According to system installers, unsanitary shower conditions will no longer be an issue for Soldiers.

"The water issue should be solved permanently," said 2nd Lt. Jacob Mong, Platoon Leader for the Water, Ammo, and Petroleum Section. "The water we are providing (the Soldiers) is cleaner than the bottled water they are drinking."

According to Mong, the ROWPU system is effective but it is a temporary measure that should eventually be replaced with a more permanent system.

"We are currently working on getting the pipeline system working, one does exist on the FOB, but it is not necessarily clean," he said.

The increased size of the ROWPU's 600-gallon-per-hour units will provide the FOB with a more secure water source. The ROWPU comes on a trailer with a generator and two large 10,000 gallon tanks. The system is designed to include all necessary equipment, supplies and chemicals to make it effective wherever it is needed.

"You just hook it up and take it where you want," said Mong.

The system was planned to be set up initially in only two weeks, but logistical and weather-related issues delayed the completion of the project for nearly two months. The recent rains may have been good for the Iraqi farmers, but also made the soil too soggy and muddy for placement of the ROWPU system.

Another issue was preparing the installation site. Sandbags and large sand-filled HESCO barriers had to be placed around the area where the ROWPU was to operate.

Installation of the system will reduce the need for water to be trucked to FOB Gains-Mills. This translates to fewer Soldiers on the road in convoys.

"Our water section was trucking over 3000 gallons of water out to FOB Gains-Mills every week. Now, I have no Soldiers from my water section on the road,"

said Mong. "Since it only takes three people to run the system, they work on a rotation system, only going out to the FOB to rotate in or out."

Once the logistics were worked out for support of the ROWPU maintenance team, Mong was able to arrange so that one Soldier comes back to FOB Warrior every other week, providing them with an opportunity to enjoy the amenities of FOB Warrior on a regular basis.

Providing for the needs of deployed Soldiers is one way the 145th Support Battalion is helping in the success of operations of the 116th BCT in the region.



Staff Sgt. Richard Martinez downloads the Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Unit on Forward Operating Base Gains-Mills.